

Toxic positivity: the pressure to always feel happy as a health care worker

Evangelia Michail Michailidou

ICU Director at General Hospital of Agrinio, Greece

Anaesthesiologist – Intensivist

Life and Leadership Coach

Date of Submission: 20-04-2023

Date of Acceptance: 30-04-2023

OPINION REVIEW

Toxic positivity. It sounds paradoxical, even absurd. How is it possible that the word positivity, intertwined with concepts such as joy and happiness, is defined by the adjective toxic? And yet, in the age of social media, this framework is spreading more and more. Thus, a whole culture of this toxic behavior is created. Phrases like “Good Vibes Only”, “Just think positive”, “Everything happens for a reason” are constantly recycled. The phenomenon is of course magnified by technology, but it also exists beyond that.

What is toxic positivity? The term toxic positivity was coined by psychotherapist Whitney Goodman, after an Instagram post. This practice argues that the permanent maintenance of a positive attitude is the only way in our life. It focuses exclusively on the positive elements of life and pushes aside anything that might trigger negative emotions. This idea may seem appealing. However, things are more complicated when it comes to the human psyche and especially for workers in the health professions.

The problem it creates:

Those who use this method usually have a good motive. There is the intention to offer help to the person facing a difficult situation or to themselves. However, what they do manage to do is invalidate the feelings of the person who is experiencing a painful time in their life.

It is noteworthy to underline that difficulties are part of the human condition. As negative and painful as the feelings caused by unpleasant events may be, they are nonetheless important. It is important to feel them, express them and validate them.

But toxic positivity interferes with this path, arguing that there is no room for such feelings. As a result, these feelings are suppressed

and there is a risk that they will explode at some point.

It would be good to come to terms with the idea that feelings we don't like are not our enemies. When we cancel or ignore unpleasant feelings, we actually magnify them. We are trapped in a vicious circle. We try to convince ourselves that we don't need to attach much importance to them. Thus, emotions grow and increase in strength throughout their repression.

The system of toxic positivity, as it becomes apparent, could be described as anything but functional. Denial of our true feelings leaves no room for understanding what is going on inside us, who our true selves are and what our needs are. Evolutionarily, too, it is good to keep in mind that humans as a species are not able to program ourselves to feel exclusively happy.

Treatment:

Supporting the people around us (or even ourselves) is not necessarily related to the concept of positivity, as oxymoronic as that may sound. When we sympathize with a person who is facing a problem, we do not force the positive approach but leave room for it to arise on its own. Positivity becomes toxic when it becomes compulsive. For a flower to bloom, we don't call it "Just bloom". We water it so that it grows and develops. Watering in our case corresponds to being good listeners. We pay attention to what he has to share with us and in no way invalidate what he feels.

The recognition of emotions plays a decisive role in cases involving ourselves. The first step when experiencing an unpleasant feeling is acceptance. "I feel this way and it seems particularly difficult." It may sound simple, but by accepting the emotion we reduce its power, because we leave room for ourselves to express ourselves freely. Writing can also be particularly useful in this process. This is because it is one of the most effective methods of capturing our emotions.



Writing is something like a bridge between what we feel and the world around us.

So the next time you find yourself in an unpleasant situation, whether personal or someone in your environment, do not rush to proceed with the easy and standard solutions offered by toxic positivity. Keep in mind that sometimes we have to leave the glass half full!